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Fate, Oppression and Betrayal: A Portrait
of "B" Movies in Manuel Puig's
El beso de la mujer araña

The six movies related in El beso de la mujer araña rely on melodrama, sentimentality, and complicated, contrived plots for appeal. According to Stephanie Merrim, "the camp vulgarity for which the "B" films are notorious...only indicates their most attractive feature: ...their mass popularity."¹ The "B" movies, then, hold the same appeal for the major characters of El beso de la mujer araña that the folletín, the telenovela and the tango and bolero lyrics hold for the major characters of Boquitas pintadas. Don Miller defines the "B" movie as:

A relatively low-budget film with few artistic aspirations--or pretensions. Many "B" pictures have proceeded to earn a great deal of money and some have gone on to become classics. The term originated in the thirties and forties when double features were common: the "B" picture was supposed to be the second feature, ...like the flip side of a hit record.²

It is interesting to note that "B" movies have the same relationship to more serious films that the folletín has to more serious novels. The following movies are narrated in El beso de la mujer araña: "Cat People," directed by Jacques Tourneur (1942); the Nazi propaganda film that Puig based on Nazi documents by "...leyendo literatura de propaganda nazi"; "The Enchanted Cottage," directed by John Cromwell (1946); the "guerrilla" film, invented by Puig; "I Walked with a Zombie," directed by Jacques Tourneur (1943) and the "Mexican" film that Puig invented based on typical Mexican films of the 1940's.³ The above named movies are listed in the order of their appearance in the novel. Moreover, the movies can be divided into two categories: those that parallel the characters' lives explicitly by action; and those that parallel the characters' lives implicitly by theme.

In El beso de la mujer araña Molina, a homosexual, and Valentín, a revolutionary, are cellmates in a Buenos Aires prison. In order to pass away the time, Molina relates movie plots to Valentín. Through Molina's narrations and Valentín's analyses we learn about their lives bit by bit. Molina, like Scheherazade, never relates the movies in one setting--he keeps Valentín intrigued by relating the movies in installments.

The first movie that Molina relates is "Cat People." Irena, the heroine, falls in with and marries an architect. The pair encounters problems since Irena is the victim of an ancient curse: when she is sexually aroused, she turns into a panther that kills. There are parallels between this movie and Molina's situation. In order to please her husband, Irena agrees to

consult a psychiatrist but stops because she feels the consultations do not help. Molina, the homosexual, is misunderstood by society just as Irena is misunderstood by her husband. Molina says:

...ya que las mujeres son lo mejor que hay...yo quiero ser mujer. Así que ahorrarme de escuchar consejos, porque yo sé lo que me pasa y lo tengo todo clarísimo en la cabeza.⁴

Irena knows that as a consequence of being part of this race of panther women, she is doomed to destroy the person she loves. Her fiancé and the psychiatrist, however, misinterpret her problem. Molina is also aware of what he is. He considers himself a woman. Although others see Molina's desire to be a woman as a problem, Molina himself sees his homosexuality as an integral part of his existence.

It is important to note here that Molina tends to identify with the heroines of these movies. When Valentín asks him with whom he identifies, Molina replies: "Con Irena, qué te creés. Es la protagonista... Yo siempre con la protagonista" (Beso 31). Hence, Molina identifies with the heroine of "Cat People" whose ultimate death is caused by elements beyond her control. Because of the curse passed on from her ancestors, Irena is outside of accepted society in the movie; she falls in love, but is unable to achieve happiness; and she ultimately dies violently, mauled by a panther. Molina's life parallels that of Irena. He searches for a fulfilling male/female relationship with himself as the female, but is unable to find it; moreover, he is as much a victim of society as Irena is of an ancient curse. Molina ultimately dies violently at the hands of terrorists. He describes Irena by saying that: "A ella se le ve que algo raro tiene; que no es una mujer como todas" (Beso 9). This description can also describe Molina's role as a female.

The second movie that Molina describes in the novel is a Nazi propaganda film. Leni, a French cabaret singer falls in love with a German officer during the German occupation of France in World War II. By threatening to kill her cousin, a group of Jews coerce her into finding out where the German arsenals in France are located. Leni foils their plans by pretending to spy for the Jews, but counterspies for the Germans instead. The Jews kill her in retaliation. Leni is a woman who would do anything for the man she loves, even die for him. In the movie the Jews think they know how to coerce her into spying for them. They encourage her to use the German officer's attraction to her to obtain information and they monitor her very closely so that they know when she is about to betray them. This movie reflects Molina's relationship with Valentín and their jailers in several ways. Molina's role in El beso de la mujer araña is similar to Leni's role in the Nazi propaganda film. He entertains Valentín by telling him movie plots like Leni entertains the German officer with her songs. In order to insure that his ailing

mother is taken care of, Molina spies on Valentín in order to find out about his subversive activities. Molina also withholds information from the authorities because of his attachment to Valentín. Molina agrees to deliver a message from Valentín to his comrades. The authorities suspect this possible betrayal and place Molina under surveillance. Molina is shot to death as a result of his attempt to deliver the message. Thus we see two distinct stories--the Nazi propaganda film and Molina's role in El beso de la mujer araña--with close parallels.

It is also interesting to note that since this movie is a Nazi propaganda film, Leni and the German officer are the hero and heroine while the Jews are the villains. Moreover, Molina is so caught up in the story he relates that he seems not to care that the film's purpose is to boost the German morale during World War II by portraying Nazis in a positive light. In the midst of the narration, Molina asks Valentín if he likes the movie.

--....¿Te gusta la película?

--No sé todavía. ¿A vos por qué te gusta tanto?
Estás transportado.

--Si me dieron a elegir una película que pudiera ver de nuevo, elegiría ésta.

--¿Y por qué? Es una inmundicia nazi, ¿o no te das cuenta? (Beso 63).

After Valentín points out that the movie is "nazi filth," Molina is offended and threatens to quit narrating the movie. Later on in the movie narration, Valentín points out that Leni is a traitor to her country. Molina says in defense of the movie that:

--Es que la película era divina, y para mí la película es lo que me importa, porque total mientras estoy acá encerrado no puedo hacer otra cosa que pensar en cosas lindas, para no volverme loco.... (Beso 85).

Thus, Molina concentrates on the presentation of the movies without regard to the specific details. This concentration on the form rather than the content suggests an approach to the novel for the reader. That is to say that the reader can regard the novel as a "B" movie love story without regard to the fact that the lovers involved happen to be two men.

"The Enchanted Cottage" is the story of an unattractive maid and the handsome aviator with whom she falls in love. Told by a blind man (who Molina says is reminiscing), the plot develops as follows: the maid works in a cottage that the young aviator rents to live in with his future wife. The maid falls in love with him but he does not notice her. He goes off to war and returns horribly disfigured. He and the maid fall in love with each other. The enchantment of the cottage comes from the fact that the couple can love each other despite their physical imperfections. Since Molina seems to narrate the movie to himself in an interior monologue, it parallels Molina's

attraction to Valentín and Valentín's ultimate acceptance of a relationship between the two, albeit a homosexual one. Elias M. Muñoz states that the union between the maid and the aviator is only reached after the aviator is scarred and thus descends to the ugly maid's level and that: "para Molina, la película sugiere la posibilidad de un milagro real: que Valentín vea más allá de su masculinidad y conseguir así el amor de un hombre verdadero."⁵ That is to say that having been placed in the same jail cell and sharing movies and opinions cause Molina and Valentín to become more equal and thus, develop a relationship.

The next film is a guerrilla film that parallels Valentín's life. The movie is about a South American student, from a wealthy family, who races cars. He wrecks his race car, separates himself from his father in Monte Carlo and falls in love with a wealthy, older woman. At this point in the movie the student ends the relationship with the older woman and the father dies. Molina stops here and the rest of the movie seems to be Valentín's interior monologue. The student returns to South America where he becomes involved in revolutionary activities. He has a relationship with a girl of half Indian blood, gets her pregnant, and feels ashamed because of her mixed heritage. He dies along with his fellow guerrillas in a shootout. Molina's initiation of this movie triggers Valentín's continuation of it. The parallels between this movie and Valentín's life can be found in several aspects. First, Valentín grew up in a middle-class lifestyle, like the protagonist of the movie. As he says in a letter to his girlfriend Marta: "...vos también fuiste criada en tu casa limpia y cómoda para gozar de la vida, y yo como vos no me conformo a ser mártir...." (Beso 182) Secondly, Valentín has a girlfriend who is also part of the revolution, but much to his shame Marta is the one he cares about:

...es la cosa que te dije de mi compañera, que tengo mucho miedo por ella, porque está en peligro...pero de quien quiero noticias, a quien tengo ganas de ver no es a ella...porque me parece que Marta sola me podría revivir.... (Beso 180)

This quote refers to his girlfriend, who is a comrade and Marta, the one he loves. On the one hand, Valentín is concerned about his comrade since she is in danger. On the other hand, however, Valentín is more concerned about Marta. This concern causes Valentín a great deal of turmoil since she (like Valentín) is a product of bourgeois society. Frances Wyers (Weber) says that in this adventure film:

The divided feelings that emerge in this pictured fantasy have to do with the hero's mother and father, Europe vs. America, racial mixing, and, repeating and encompassing those relations, with the inevitable betrayals called forth by the class struggle in Latin America.⁶

Hence, Valentín's conflict parallels the conflict of the film's protagonist since he feels that he has disappointed his parents; he thinks he is disloyal to his cause by loving Marta and finally struggles with his conservative upbringing and his current status as a revolutionary. Valentín feels guilty about going against his upbringing: "un muchacho que abre fuego contra su propia casa, un muchacho que abre fuego contra su propia sangre" (Beso 149). Although this statement is part of the interior monologue of the movie, it can describe Valentín as well. This film, then, not only parallels certain aspects of Valentín's life--it also serves to fill in gaps of information about his background.

"I Walked with a Zombie," like most of the other movies in El beso de la mujer araña, is narrated by Molina; however, unlike the other two movies that are based on real movies, Puig changes some of the plot elements (Coddou 12). The plot, as narrated in the novel, is as follows: the heroine goes to a tropical island in order to marry her fiancé, a wealthy widower who owns a coffee plantation. Almost everyone on the island is a zombie, including the plantation owner's first wife. After narrowly escaping being turned into a zombie herself, the second wife sets fire to the island and escapes, thus killing the husband. She also frees the islanders from oppression since the husband had made them into zombies in order to provide cheap labor for his coffee plantation.⁷ The parallel between this movie and the novel can be found in the fact that the plantation owner's first wife and the natives of the island are controlled and oppressed by the plantation owner like Molina and Valentín are controlled and oppressed (sexually and politically) by the Argentine government. Moreover, the islanders, as well as Molina and Valentín, escape this oppression by dying. Ironically the islanders die at the hands of their liberator while Molina and Valentín die at the hands of their oppressors.

The final movie narrated in El beso de la mujer araña is a movie based on Mexican films of the 1940's. It is the story of a young singer, unhappily married to a much older business tycoon, who falls in love with a young journalist investigating a scandal involving her husband. The business tycoon finds out his wife has fallen in love with the journalist and she leaves him in order to escape his rage and pursue her singing career. The tycoon arranges things so that the singer is unable to find work and so that the reporter is blacklisted. He becomes ill and the singer becomes a prostitute so that she may care for him. He dies as a result of finding out how the singer has prostituted herself to care for him. This film parallels the nurturing aspect of Molina's relationship with Valentín. When Valentín becomes ill because of the food (tainted by prison officials to make him more likely to talk) Molina takes care of him. He cooks for him using food that is given to him by prison officials. He cleans up after Valentín, thinks up movie plots to tell him and even eats the poisoned food to prevent Valentín from becoming sicker. In short, Molina sacrifices himself in order to care for

Valentín like the singer sacrifices herself to care for the journalist. Both Molina and the singer care for, entertain, and eventually lose the men they love.

In these movies we have seen parallels related to theme, action and character development that are reflected in the novel itself. The themes we have seen developed in both the movies and the novel are: fate, oppression, love, betrayal, and death. The action we have seen paralleled between the book and the movie includes: the telling of movies, the development of relationships and the deaths of the major characters. The character development manifests itself through Molina as Valentín's entertainer, nurturer, confidant, and lover and through Valentín as the analyzer and Molina's more philosophical counterpart. In the final analysis the movies serve as an escape from the harsh realities of oppression for the major characters and a means of reiteration of the various elements of the novel for the reader.

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NOTES

¹Stephanie Merrim, "Through the film Darkly: Grade "B" Movies and Dreamwork in Tres tristes tigres and El beso de la mujer araña," Modern Language Studies 15(4) (1984): 300.

²Don Ethan Miller, The Book of Jargon: An Essential Guide to the Inside Languages of Today (New York: Macmillan, 1981) 78.

³Marcelo Coddou, "Seis preguntas a Manuel Puig sobre su última novela: El beso de la mujer araña," The American Hispanist 2(18) (1977): 12-13. Further references to this work appear in the text.

⁴Manuel Puig, El beso de la mujer araña (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1976) 25. Further references to this work appear in the text with Beso followed by the page number.

⁵Elias Miguel Muñoz, "El discurso utópico de la sexualidad en El beso de la mujer araña, de Manuel Puig," Revista iberoamericana 52 (1986): 368.

⁶Frances Wyers (Weber), "Manuel Puig at the Movies," Hispanic Review 49(1981): 175.

⁷In the article cited in note 1, Stephanie Merrim gives a plot summary of the original "I Walked with a Zombie" and contrasts it with Puig's adaptation by pointing out that "Puig retains the background of the original while grossly rearranging the plot and characters to achieve a symbolic configuration. The extra-marital complications of the original fall away and the erstwhile nurse becomes a second wife so that the new version can focus on the triangle of a husband and his first and second wives" (306).